

Book Review: America's Right: Anti-Establishment Conservatism from Goldwater to the Tea Party

by Blog Admin

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*21st century American conservatism has moved far beyond the Reagan Revolution of small government, lower taxes and a respect for tradition. The alliance of libertarians, neoconservatives, and the Christian right has launched anxious and angry attacks on the purported homosexual agenda, the “hoax” of climate change, the rule by experts and elites, and the banishment of religion from the public realm. This book examines the nature of anti-establishment conservatism, traces its development from the 1950s to the Tea Party, and explains its political ascendance. This book will not disappoint students of US politics, writes **Joel Krupa**.*

America's Right: Anti-Establishment Conservatism from Goldwater to the Tea Party. Robert B. Horwitz. Polity Press. May 2013.

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America's Right: Anti-Establishment Conservatism from Goldwater to the Tea Party opens with an appalling picture. It is of a [billboard advertisement](#), replete with a degrading tagline (“radical leaders prey on the fearful and naïve”) and a mocking reference to an imagined era of “Democratic socialism”, that is highlighted by an endorsement from the North Iowa Tea Party. Depicting President Barack Obama nestled between Marxist Vladimir Lenin and the former Third Reich leader Adolf Hitler, the black-and-white photo eerily captures an alleged link between Obama and international politicians of dubious character that rests as an anchor of Tea Party rhetoric. It is imagery that, while *a priori* ridiculous, accurately captures how many hysterics in the Republican camp conceptualize modern left-leaning perspectives. In this era of increasingly polarized politics and escalating partisanship, these grotesquely misleading displays are becoming increasingly popular across the American heartland, with some managing to convey [equally offensive and patently false messaging](#).

At first glance, such incoherent nonsense would be easy to laugh off as the work of fringe lunatics, wonky religious nuts, and fanatical special interest groups. Closer examination reveals, however, that these sorts of strange views are by no means outliers; instead, it can safely be argued that they are largely consistent with key [explicit](#) and [implicit](#) tenets of the post-Obama re-election Republican movement. Even more worrying is that these loony ideas are not consigned only to conspiracy theories around the President's ([largely non-existent](#)) communist tendencies, supposedly Islamic religious beliefs, or non-American place of birth. Tragically, it seems that the wild views of a significant minority in the Republican base – primarily an interdependent mishmash of Christian fundamentalists, Deep South racists, and neoconservative interventionists – have captured the ideological grounding of the more traditional side of the political spectrum. The results speak for themselves (a partial list of said results might include the [ill-considered invasion of Iraq](#), an absurd [counter-scientific refusal to address anthropogenic climate change](#), and an almost quaint belief in [American exceptionalism](#)).

But how did this happen? When did radical ideology and intemperate rebellion become the *modus operandi* of a once-proud party? Why have illogical dogmas – unwavering anti-tax stances, fervent abortion foiling, and blistering homophobia – become central beliefs that any prospective Republican candidate with a chance of succeeding must (at least tacitly) endorse? Is this a new phenomenon, or merely the logical culmination of a slow and steady decay? And, perhaps most confusingly of all, why does this loathsome worldview continue to take precedence over wholly legitimate conservative concerns like the size of government, the strength of labour unions, and the ability to exercise personal freedoms, especially when one can see – in full-sight, no less – the outcomes and impacts that such ideologies have had on America's ability to lead the free world?

In *America's Right*, the abovementioned new book from University of California – San Diego academic [Robert Horwitz](#), these questions and others are analysed as the unfortunate trajectory of the Republicans is traced from the failed 1964 presidential run of Barry Goldwater to the ascendancy of the bumbling Tea Party hooligans. While not as engaging as similarly themed journalistic books by [Hedges](#), [Gray](#), and others, Horwitz's historically-inclined book still contains some valuable and compelling pieces of analysis. At time obnoxious (such as Rev. Jerry Falwell's outrageous pro-war stance), foolish (epitomized in Tea Party calls to get government removed from the government-backed Medicare program) and downright odious (evinced in the so-called Moral Majority's [backing of the still-troubled South African nation's former apartheid government](#)), the subject matter of this tome is likely to drive even the calmest reader to bouts of uncontrollable disgust. Despite its repugnance, the content alone makes *America's Right* worth perusing and, if one is prepared to overlook a certain amount of dry prose (mostly found in the usual form of mandatory references to rather uninteresting academic positing), it will not disappoint.

From the beginning, Horwitz is careful to clarify that his target is not the rather sensible Republican views of the Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jon Huntsman, or even Chris Christie variety – a group with more moderate conservative leanings that, ultimately, are rooted in a cerebral base comprised of heavyweights like Burke, de Tocqueville, and Locke. The eminently reasonable political philosophy of Schwarzenegger (which this reviewer was fortunate enough to see first-hand during an internship opportunity), for example, was focused on [bipartisan legislation-building](#), [fiscal probity](#), and [strong environmental protections that simultaneously nurtured economic growth](#). None of that thoughtfulness is present in what Horwitz describes as the so-called “anti-establishment” Republicans – individuals who are defined (to borrow from historian Richard Hofstadter's earlier descriptions of the movement) by the way they “engaged in political argument (conspiracy mongering), expressed their political subjectivities (as rage), and understood themselves (as patriotic victims, in McCarthy's old phrase, of “a conspiracy so immense”). Hofstadter goes on to note the obvious; namely, that “[this] paranoid outlook affected substantive political content, transforming otherwise legitimate political disputes into fevered charges of betrayal and treason, the violation of natural law or God's will, and resulted in a poisoned political climate and the widespread abuse of people's rights”.

Within this context, a couple points from the work are worth underlining. The first is a brief chronicle of the neoconservative movement's emergence. Originally left-leaning thinkers, “neocons” moved rightward *en masse* as a response to the perceived threat of Soviet empire-building, seeing Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern and peace-loving others of his ilk as unfit to implement a sufficiently aggressive foreign policy that attacked communism and “liberated” those who were ruled by it. On the right is where most of them stayed, ultimately assuming important governmental positions in the second Bush administration. Their names – Wolfowitz, Libby, Feith – are now (in)famous, as are their converts (Cheney and Rumsfeld king among them). Horwitz covers this in-depth, integrating fascinating revelations and anecdotes from those with knowledge of this trend.

Second, many will be absorbed by an interesting discussion on the oft-covered Tea Partiers. They are, according to Horwitz, an uneasy bunch – as suspicious of Republican Ivy League graduates as they are of more traditional objects of conservative ire. This is not to say that they are balanced in their disdain; indeed, they almost always tend to toe the Republican line. Cataloguing their inconsistencies and small-mindedness would take a review in and of itself, and most certainly cannot be covered in this brief space; one infuriating line from Horwitz will suffice. He notes that after the 2010 midterm elections (where the budget deficit was repeatedly described as the most important issue facing Americans), “the issue that Congressional Republicans pushed hardest in the 2010 lame-duck session was..[a tax cut] item that added \$81.5 billion to the national deficit.” Their hypocrisy, it seems, knows no bounds.

Deploying a mix of convenient interpretations of Scripture, idealized nationalism, and empty appeals to government spending restraints, the anti-establishment reactionaries are largely devoid of any solid evidence for their claims. They disparage government spending under Obama, ignoring that beloved presidents Bush Jr. and Reagan were responsible for mind-blowing deficits in their time. Tea Partiers believe in freedom for the individual, yet support conservative media outlets intent on preserving opportunities that will primarily benefit a small sliver of the overall population. They bemoan the rise of “entitlement programs” designed to level the playing field, heaping unconscionable scorn on health care reform that would cover some of society’s most vulnerable citizens (and, likely, some of them as well). These contemptible views have little place in mainstream civil society, and Horwitz’s does a good job of laying bare their intellectual bankruptcy.

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